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ABSTRACT

The paper maintains that a study of violence in American society can help junior and senior high school students understand individual rights and responsibilities, develop a fuller self-awareness, and increase their tolerance for the law. Teachers can work toward these objectives by designing activities which help students differentiate and understand various types of violence (physical, psychological, individual, corporate, and environmental), grapple with questions of why people behave in violent ways, determine personal attitudes toward violence, and investigate how violence in America might be solved. Two violence-related models are presented. The first model focuses on violence as an experience students have encountered personally or are familiar with through the media or a study of history. Activities involve students in making a survey of violence in popular songs, writing a paper on cartoon violence, and participating in a field trip to the local jail. The second model is based on creating a slide show on violence throughout American history. Students are directed to select a period of American history, locate and reproduce violence-related photographs of the period, list significant violent incidents, and locate and record music from the era. The paper concludes with a diagram showing how various reading, discussion, symposium, and/or independent study activities can be combined to develop a unit on violence. (DB)

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TEACHING ABOUT VIOLENCE IN AMERICA by

Robert A. Campbell

Despite the fact that nobody seems to know what to do about America's alarming addiction to violence, the early and mid-1970's witnessed a proliferation of articles, books, tabloids, television specials, and Senate investigations which analyzed--in some cases sensationalized--violence in sports, rape, television violence, child abuse, violence and vandalism in the schools, soaring crime rates, and so the list goes ad infinitum. The handling of so complex and mercurial a topic as violence in America often produced divergent and uneven reports. Nevertheless, these studies, popular and scholarly, have performed the valuable service of elevating America's consciousness on the violence issue in several ways. First, these studies have reminded us that our violence can no longer be dismissed as an urban or minorities problem; it is both pervasive--cutting across geographical, ethnic, social, economic, and professional boundaries--and costly. According to a recent study, school related violence and vandalism alone cost us nearly \$600 million annually.¹ Equally disturbing, but more difficult to put a price tag on, are students and teachers who "drop out," literally or psychologically, because of the atmosphere of violence in the schools. Commenting upon this tragic waste, the Reverend Jesse Jackson says, "there's a tremendous amount of non-learning going on--and that is the crime of crimes as far as I'm concerned."² Second, the causes of and solutions to violence are obviously complex. Is our violence due to a natural disposition or biological trait? Learned behavior? Aggressive models? Our frontier

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experience? Pent up frustrations? A socio-economic system that generates materialism, competition, and exploitation? Permissive education? Moral decay? Incomprehensible social change? Liberal courts? Political and legal bureaucracies? The Industrial Revolution? As James Q. Wilson, distinguished Harvard criminologist, says, "we are facing a problem whose causes we don't understand and which we probably can't eliminate in a generation or two."³ Echoing that observation, Senator Birch Bayh, Chairman of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Violence, says about school related violence and vandalism, "there is no single, all encompassing solution to these problems; there are no panaceas, no magic wands."⁴ Third, despite the public's ravenous appetite for more violence in the media, entertainment, and spectator sports, these studies convey a note of urgency and warning, a distinct MAY-DAY! The very language used to describe our violence frequently comes from a medical lexicon: "disease," "sick society," "epidemic of violence," "plague," etc. And counterparts for these popular medical metaphors may be found in the vocabulary used to describe psychological states often closely allied to the violence we experience: "alienation," "anxiety," "rebellion," "loss," "doubt," "fear," "anguish," "despair," and "fragmentation."

Sensing that our nation may be at some calamitous crossroad unless we can solve or ease the violence problem, scores of concerned citizens and organizations-- the AFT, NEA, NASSP, to name but a few--have marshalled their energies and resources to stem the tide of violence in our schools. Paradoxically, these groups don't always serve the immediate and varied needs of teachers and administrators at the grass roots level where problems of school violence are not so dramatic or so publicized as those

In large urban centers. Sometimes the findings and recommendations of these groups convey an abstract or institutional ring, as in Senator Bayh's recommendation that we attempt to reduce school related violence and vandalism through "the active involvement of the education community," i.e., teachers, administrators, students, and parents.⁵ Without detracting from the laudable efforts and achievements of Senator Bayh and his colleagues, there still remains a murky question for the classroom teacher interested in coping with violence through his or her teaching: "Where do I start?" "By becoming more humanistic?"⁶ "By getting back to the basics?" "By cracking down?"⁷

My response to these questions is to begin by studying the problem, i.e., violence. Many law-related articles I read deal with the social problem of violence from the perspective of law as the sine qua non of Western Civilization. And it may be. Studying the law may lead to an understanding of violence and the necessity of law. By the same token, studying violence is perhaps intrinsically more interesting to students--because of its immediacy and concreteness--and may lead to a heightened awareness and understanding of the individual's rights and responsibilities, i.e., civic awareness. Admittedly, my rationale that studying violence leads to a fuller self-awareness and tolerance for the law may not stand up under syllogistic scrutiny. But the underlying premise is feasible, and in the following sections of the paper I've set forth my assumptions and objectives in teaching about violence as well as two mini-units or models I've used in the classroom.

GETTING STARTED: Assumptions and Objectives

Anyone wanting to teach a course on violence in America would do well to sort out his or her assumptions and objectives. An initial assumption I make is that teaching outside my area of specialization is a worthwhile challenge and a stimulating change for me and my students. Offsetting the moments of academic uncertainty or awkwardness is an invigorating awareness that I'm charting new territory and learning with my students. A second point. Students have a seemingly built-in curiosity about violence. And why not? It's in the mainstream of their culture: Music, language, television, sports, drugs, cars, dating, and sex. So why not capitalize upon that interest and curiosity? A third assumption. One of the most exciting aspects of teaching about violence is the rich opportunity it affords for interdisciplinary study. Helping students "see" connections between disciplines is a heady and rewarding experience. And I've discovered--not that it's such a profound discovery--that the interdisciplinary aspects of studying violence challenge students' upper level cognitive skills, i.e., their ability to compare, contrast, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate. In short, the interdisciplinary approach has rewards for students and teachers alike.

A final but most important step toward "getting started" involves stating one's objectives. Here are some of mine. First, I want students to differentiate and understand various kinds of violence, from the physical to the psychological, individual, corporate, and environmental. Second, I encourage students to grapple with such difficult questions as "Why is man violent?" "Why do Americans seem to behave more violently than peoples of other cultures?" "What is my attitude toward violence?"

"What can we do to begin solving the violence problem in America?" Third, I want students, through their historical and cultural awareness of violence, to gain an enlightened understanding of their laws, privileges, and responsibilities as citizens.

MODEL A

Given the broad topic "Violence in America," I begin by answering three questions. How much time can I allot to the unit? What kinds of students will I be working with? And what emphasis or focus, i.e., historical, literary, popular culture, will the course have? The availability of violence related materials for the classroom poses no major problem, since libraries, the media, and a single paperback, say Arthur Diagon's *VIOLENCE: U.S.A.*, provide ample resources. When I've answered the above questions, I can go on to map out the following steps, each of which is flexible enough to fit various schedules.

- Step #1. Prior to any formal reading or lectures, we discuss violence as an experience students have encountered, either vicariously or personally, and filter out various examples of violence in history, literature, film, television, music, and so forth. Gradually we move toward tentative definitions of violence and sort out different kinds of violence, e.g., individual, collective, physical, psychological, etc.
- Step #2. After taking the National Survey Questionnaire (from the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence), we tally and discuss our responses.
- Step #3. We view a slide presentation entitled *MAN AGAINST MAN: A STUDY IN AGGRESSION* (The Center for Humanities, Inc.), a helpful analysis of violence and aggression with the underlying thesis that man's aggressive and violent behaviors are learned rather than instinctive and that man must learn to channel his aggressive behavior into constructive and creative experiences.
- Step #4. Distribute course description and explain objectives, requirements, and various activities (see Activities List below). Students may opt for individual activities (Plan A) or Group Reading/Discussion (Plan B).

ACTIVITIES

- a. Make a survey of violence in popular songs; e.g., the Beatles' "Maxwell's Silver Hammer," John Denver's "The Box," etc.
- b. Make a study of child abuse, using THE READER'S GUIDE TO PERIODICAL LITERATURE as a reference source.
- c. Compile a list of violent programs on television and make a study of the various kinds of violence shown.
- d. Give a talk or write a paper on cartoon violence.
- e. Make a slide program on violence in American Culture.
- f. Prepare a written or oral report on intolerance directed toward women and minorities.
- g. Make a statistical study of national versus local crime rates.
- h. Participate in a panel discussion on any one of the following topics: capital punishment, violence in sports, political assassinations, gun control laws, television violence, school related violence, law and order, penal reform, violence against the environment, etc.
- i. Make a written or oral report on American "heroes" (from Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., O.J. Simpson, John F. Kennedy, et al) or American "villains" (Bonnie and Clyde, John Brown, Charles Manson, Richard Speck, et al).
- j. Plan a field trip to the local or county jail or the state penitentiary.

Step #5. To give the violence mini-unit a change of pace and also to provide different perspectives, invite a guest speaker to talk on some aspect of violence in his or her profession. Some obvious examples: policemen, probation officers, social workers, physicians, coaches, lawyers, et al. Let me briefly give a prime example of how this can work. Mr. Dusty Wissmath, a University of Wyoming law student, is extremely interested in the protection and preservation of wolves. His slide show and lecture on wolves may seem remote from the topic of "social studies" or "law-related education," but his presentation triggered one of the liveliest discussions we've had as students brought up numerous examples of man's predacious use of his environment: the slaughter of the American Bison, the annual killing of Harp Seals off Newfoundland, Japanese killing of dolphins, etc. What started as a talk on wolves evolved into a

heated dialogue about man's abuse of the environment and also how his economic values may lead to disregard for the ecology.

Step #6. In educational jargon this last step should be described as a "culminating activity." I'd prefer to call it a colloquium or symposium (minus the wine) in which we exchange information, compare viewpoints, and generally consider what we've learned about violence in our culture and also our own attitude toward violence.

MODEL B: An Automated, Two Carousel Slide Show on Violence in America

Having practically no "hands-on" audio visual experience--I do well to operate a Polaroid without any SNAFU's--it took an extra measure of courage or madness to accept my ninth grade social studies class' challenge that we make a slide show about violence in America. After several chaotic periods of brainstorming, I concluded that some arbitrary guidelines had to be laid down if we really intended to produce a "show."

My initial step was to divide 200 years of American History into ten units (Revolutionary War Era, Westward Movement, The Twenties, Great Depression, Civil Rights Movement, etc.), largely along lines of unit and chapter divisions in our text (LIBERTY AND UNION, Houghton Mifflin). I then assigned two or three students, not without complaint, to each unit and asked them to: (1) Make a cursory overview of the material in their unit; (2) Compile a list of significant violent incidents, such as wars, battles, assassinations, riots, and crimes; (3) Locate violence-related photographs, using such sources as TIME, LIFE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, AMERICAN HERITAGE, New York TIMES, etc.; (4) Take and develop photographs, keeping careful written records of photos taken; and (5) Locate and record music contemporaneous with the historic era or subject being studied. Looking back upon this stage of our slide show, I'd be less than candid if I implied that it went off with the numerical neatness of the steps

I've just listed. Far from it! There were daily irritants to overcome: misplaced magazines, books, and LP records, lost photographs, unavailable books and music, photographic miscues, "goofing around," territorial bickering, and other frustrations I've willfully forgotten.

The next major phase in our production, the editing, involved selecting 160 frames from the 220 photos taken. And from nearly three dozen musical compositions, ranging from Mozart to Bach to Glen Miller and the Beatles, 12 minutes (3-5 seconds for each of the 160 slides) worth of excerpts. With the assigned editors and virtually the entire class selecting photographs and music, there were squabbles over which photos and music to include. I've since learned this squabbling is an inevitable and perhaps even healthy part of the editing.

Having made our overall selection of photos and music, we then began putting the 160 slides into a meaningful chronological sequence. By placing several dozen frames on an illuminated lightboard it was relatively easy to put the slides in chronological order. Much of the program's effectiveness and impact depends upon contrasts--sometimes subtle, sometimes glaring--between individual and entire groups of slides. At this juncture our slides took on an interesting transformation: They not only chronicled American violence from 1776 to 1977, they provided a definite social commentary. And while I shouldn't attempt to paraphrase that commentary, I think it interesting that students titled the program "For the Love of Violence."

Rather than describe in awkward prose the remaining rather technical steps, I've listed all the major steps below, including the equipment used:

- Step #1: Take photographs (35 SLR with macro lens on a copystand)
- Step #2: Develop film and mount pictures on 2 x 2" frames.
- Step #3: Edit and arrange photos in sequence desired (illuminated light-board used for arranging in sequence).
- Step #4: Calculate the program time by computing the time per unit, i.e., the Civil War, and then adding the unit time for each of the other nine units. Normal "hold" time for a single slide in a program of this kind would range from 3 to 5 seconds, depending upon the slide itself, the music and the desired effect.
- Step #5: Select and record music from a record player to a reel to reel tape. If the slide show had ten "units" and ten corresponding musical selections, it would be important to time the length of the music recorded to match the time the unit lasts. For example, if the Civil War unit were programmed to last 48 seconds, you'd obviously need 48 seconds worth of music. Equipment: Record player and a reel to reel tape recorder.
- Step #6: Mix the music by using an audio mixer and recorder, which puts individual recordings on one tape, fading in one selection and fading out the previous one for smooth transitions.
- Step #7: Place an inaudible signal impulse on the tape, using an Audio-Cassette Recorder. The inaudible signal feeds into the Dissolve, which alternates signals to the carousels.

After almost a month we were ready to view our "creation." Admittedly the photographs and music weren't really ours. But they represented a student perspective, commentary, or perhaps even a vision of violence in America. The students were proud of their production, primarily, I think, because they had actually "made" something. It's been more than a year since we completed "For the Love of Violence," and we've shown it to other junior high classes, college classes, parents, and to several educational conventions. I can't help feeling good about "For the Love of Violence" when the students who helped produce it occasionally drop in, wanting to see "our show."

CONCLUSION

The violence challenge thrusts several difficult choices upon the classroom teacher: To ignore the problem; to leave it to so-called "experts"; or to deal with it in a constructive, meaningful fashion. For teachers already feeling the pressure of too many responsibilities, the idea of teaching a mini-unit on violence may seem Quixotically preposterous, like jousting against windmills. My own preference, to accept the challenge, comes from a concern that the stakes are indeed high and also from having learned that the rewards are great.

